THE CRISIS OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE CHURCH

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The first "crisis" is the Book-Crisis. With all Anglicans, the Book of Common Prayer has played a unique and central role in our spirituality. There were two main reasons for this. In the first place, it grew from and then nourished and guarded the peculiar unity-cum-diversity dear to Anglicans. The Anglican affection for this spiritual commodity did not always arise from the noblest of motives. There was always in it a measure of political compromise, certainly an essential of Tudor eccelesiastical policies. But perhaps it was not only that; there is nothing in itself ignoble about wishing to maintain a unity of the spirit whch could also forage widely on different grasses. I dare say there was always in it something of the island spirituality of Britain—the special need to respect common conventions and agreements because there wasn't all outdoors in which to do your own thing. This is the spirit which is reflected in the phrase "Keep Britain Tidy"—an island version of the more loose-jointed American hope to "Keep America Green.

Such are not very noble motivations, perhaps. Nobler ones often moved, however, in Anglican thought. One such was the positive understanding that unity did not consist in people thinking alike, but rather in people acting together—and the Prayer Book was an instance of common action which helped to teach this principle to generations of people. Another was the welcome given to the tensions themselves, as between different schools of thought which could inform one another and learn from one another and be led to deeper understanding of truth than either would have gained in isolation. A third was a still deeper apprehension of a "Church spirit," as contrasted with the "Sect spirit." In this, many saw a sharp contrast between the Sect, seemingly preoccupied with identifying those who should not belong to it, and the Church, hoping at least to be a home for all believers. No doubt "Church" was often bought at the price of significant convictions, and "Sect" often preserved graces and disciplines lost in easy Anglican accommodation. Nevertheless there was a degree of greatness in the dream of unity for which the Prayer Book spoke.

In the second place, the Book of Common Prayer seemed to guarantee a full and rich and inclusive spiritual diet for people. It set them free from the tyranny of an individual teacher or the spirit of a particular time. It taught them to range freely through all the Christian centuries, across the wide variety of Christian devotion, into all the areas of life; and did so in ways which nourished and civilized their minds and spirits. It opened a treasure house of prayer to people, as rich as any in the Christian community. It promised to liberate and free the human spirit. It bred in Anglicans what Dean Fosbroke called a "verbal mysticism," which bound us indeed to a more rigorous fidelity to words and phrases than perhaps was good for us, but which also helped to lift the marriage of mind and spirit to a high place and to dignify the participation of clergy and laity in corporate worship. Finally, it brought together the church's teaching and the church's prayers in a unique way. We were taught by our prayers, and we learned to pray our theology.

One would have to say, I think, that the Prayer Book, by itself, did not and could not create a full and balanced spirituality for Christians. It was the vessel —a superbly beautiful vessel—of public and corporate worship; but, by itself, it ministered only indirectly to man's solitude and his own interior life. And lacking, at many times, in many places, the other helps Christians need—the helps toward personal prayer and individual discipline and devotion—it tended to breed in Anglicans a spirituality strongly corporate and liturgical, a church-going spirituality, which often was too frail a beast to survive the lonely trials of life or to be able to speak clearly to the unconverted. It was a servant more of the gathered than of the frontier.

This, surprisingly, was so despite the fact that in its Prayer Book, the church had an admirable tool of mission—a portable vade mecum of christian teaching and worship open to every man or woman individually as well as corporately. I can never forget that the first converts to Christianity in my sometime diocese were a handful of Indians, taught the faith by some ship-wrecked sailors, one of whom had a Prayer Book in his sea-chest. Nothing used to titillate and disconcert my old companions more than that incident, when I would recite it.

It was also, being so extensively public and corporate, a spirituality largely built on convention, on order, on activity, and allowing — or encouraging, at any rate — little of silence, little of the spontaneous or the personal, little of the unexpected, little of the natural (as contrasted with the designed, formal, mannered, clothed). No congregation in Christendom knows panic more keenly than an Episcopalian one whose organ breaks down in the middle of a hymn or whose service is interrupted by a stranger arguing with the preacher.

On both these gounds, the spirituality established by the Prayer Book all too often became a spirituality limited to the Prayer Book. Therefore, for example, when the church undertook Prayer Book revision in earnest, and the various trial rites made their appearance, the result was a disturbance amounting almost to a minor convulsion. It was and is frightening to many Episcopalians — not all in their middle years — to lose the assurance of the Book. It frightens because it weakens the sense of order and unity; it frightens even more because of the spiritual nakedness it reveals as people discover the degree to which they were bound to the Book, and the little they can establish as their own independent spiritual statement.

And this is compounded by the seeming swiftness of rebellion against the whole style and vocabulary of the Prayer Book. The gentle bowdlerizing which issued in the first trial liturgy went for very little. The mini/midi/maxi of the present trial rites is a somewhat more dashing adventure, like a Victorian lady's experiment with laughing gas. But such experiments as these are not likely to save the Prayer Book as it has been known and has served the Anglican household these 400 years. Whatever is to take its place will almost certainly be so great a variety of liturgical expressions as to present Episcopalians with a new situation altogether.

The second element — the second crisis — is the Faith-Crisis. Here, certainly, Episcopalians have no copyright of their own. The theological crisis is well-nigh universal, and it is not — it need not be — felt to be catastrophic. A pessimistic appraisal recently published summarizes its conclusions thus: "As

matters now stand we can see little long-term future for the church as we know it . . . This is hardly to suggest that religion itself will die . . . but whether or not the religion of the future is in any sense Christian remains to be seen. Clearly it will not be if one means by Christian the orthodoxy of the past and the institutional structures built upon that theology."*

This is a statement of two competent sociologists on the basis of an exhaustive study of contemporary American church life, and it deserves to be taken seriously. But it presupposes that God is the church's prisoner, who cannot lead us now as he has in the past; and it presupposes that "the orthodoxy of the past" and "theology" are synonymous. If one does not accept those presuppositions, then the picture may be quite different. It is not less demanding as far as the work ahead of the church is concerned, but that is not a final catastrophe of the faith in any sense.

But in the meantime, the contemporary Christian himself or herself is obliged to confront theological issues, usually without adequate weapons or training, handicapped by years of being conditioned to think that theological reasoning was a specialized study for professionals and had little or nothing to do with the every-day moral and ethical issues which were the important things. For the Episcopalian, this problem is somewhat sharpened by the way in which the Prayer Book served as his theological teacher and authority. *Lex credendi* was a safe, ceremonial sword as long as it was sheathed in *lex orandi*. The Prayer Book took care of all the believing necessary, or the church did corporately in the Prayer Book. Therefore the conventional churchgoer could comfortably lose his personal theological crises in the assured orderly measures of the liturgy.

I said once that I had at one time feared "for the future of the Episcopal Church (but) I do so no longer; it will never die. If it did not exist it would have to be invented . . . it can adapt itself to any society, able always to defend itself by the supple magic of its history and tradition from any charge of faithlessness."† That was much too harsh, and I was quickly told so. But what was true in it was more important than what was untrue. We Episcopalians have bred and we have been bred in a tradition of theological irresponsibility as blameworthy as any other Christian communion I know; and the mark of this to me is the devastating loss of theological nerve which afflicts our church so painfully.

Perhaps a better phrase for this crisis is to call it the "Order-Crisis" — the confusion, the uncertainty, about any order or structure in our existence. A minor facet of this might be our restlessness as to the ministerial orders of the church; but this seems to me a restlessness which only superficially affects our spirituality. Everybody — bishop, priest, deacon, layman, laywoman — is testing, re-examining his or her role in life. Since we have all — ordained and unordained alike — inherited spectacularly bad ideas of our roles, it is surely good that this furore go on until we get some better ones.

But underlying this restlessness is far deeper and far more destructive despair, in the uncertainty whether there is any order in reality at all. Politically,

* *American Piety,* R. Stark and C. V. Glock, p. 223
† *The Optional God,* S. F. Bayne, p. 24

for example, it is now a commonplace to say that the present structure of the American republic has little or no further usefulness and must be abandoned or at least radically redesigned. Since the propositions, on which the republic is built are basically theological propositions, one would have thought that Christions would welcome such exploration and change, not because there is no longer any order in politics, but precisely because the order which informs the American propositions is no longer clear and needs fresh statement and estblishment. The crisis is that such a welcoming response seems impossible to win from many Christians. The 18th century was far less a century of faith — or at least of credulity — than the 20th; yet it was in the 18th and not the 20th that one found the robust and simple spirituality which radical political imagination requred. In our time, any reference to order except in terms of safe streets and obedient students seems to frighten everybody, instead of inviting the buoyant, eager, theological exploration which a healthy spirituality would make possible.

As of politics, so would I feel of other areas in which the very concept or possibility of order has seemingly been lost. It is amazing to reflect on how few years it has taken for the revolution in sexual morality to take place, or the revolt against the work/money/possession morality. The moral landmarks by which my own contemporaries were trained, and tried to train their children, have been nearly obliterated; and it is no wonder that so many, young and old, are deeply troubled by the loss of the fixed points once accepted in our society. I see no crisis in the disquietude we feel. The crisis lies in the despair with which the challenge to moral restatement is seen. My heart goes out to the simple man who weeps because nobody seems to believe in decency or in a good day's work any more. Well he may weep; but it strikes me that the believing man, however simple, should be able to bring more than tears to the work of finding the new order which must take the place of the old. And it strikes me that it is exactly here — in our inability to get down to our work — that the crisis lies. We perceive our despair and our weakness, and we cannot find the assurance of moral order we need to overcome them.

The price of the easy popularity of the churches in the last two decades was largely that God was seen as a clergyman, mainly concerned about the welfare of the congregation and its members. To this day, for example, the theological and moral implications of the Russian revolution have never seemed proper stuff for the church to talk about. It was even more so when it came to Fascism and the Nazi movement. Were there not Christians on both sides? Therefore God was neutral, perhaps unconcerned, certainly not letting himself get involved. This was the price many paid, for the sake of the comfort they themselves drew from the church and its rich worship. The result, all too often, is now the hopelessness with which the political and moral frontiers of this time are seen. This is the crisis I mention.

The third crisis could be called an Identity-Crisis, if by that one meant that the very possibility of an individual identity itself were in question — not what self am I, but can I be a self at all. But I would prefer to call it a Freedom-Crisis, a despairing skepticism about the reality or worth of any choice a man or woman can make. It is the deepest crisis, which pervades and infects all the other polarities and puzzles in our time.

I will not try to define "spirituality"; but whatever words we might use to describe it will always be words that in some way speak of a person choosing to become the self he dimly feels he is, and of the various ways in which a person makes his own statement, before God, finds his feet, comes to terms with his own existence, even — before he is done — is able to come to terms with his own death.

Therefore true spirituality utterly depends on an assurance that the choices we make are real choices with real consequences, in real time, and of real worth in the eyes of a reality able even to behold and judge the present world within a greater context. "The Lord's eyes consider the poor, and his eyelids try the children of men." Only before such a reality can spirituality be anything more than game-playing. In the face of such a reality, human freedom — human self-hood — is seen in all its order and exalted greatness.

It is characteristic of our time to know a terrible ambiguity about this. Young men and women particularly are torn. On one side, they see the pursuit of the transcendent as being an escape from the real issues — a cop-out. With unexcelled sincerity, they try to confront the issues of this time, this world — the environmental issues, the issues of war and peace, the issues of a social morality now clearly breaking down under the pressures of a life for which that morality was never devised and is not able to meet. They fear lest they be distracted from this by the pursuit of the transcendent. Such other-worldliness as they have had indeed tended to distract Christians from their social witness, in the past. They are not encouraged to run that risk again.

Yet they are not so blindly activist that they do not know the fragility of activism itself, as a life style, save where there is — however cloudy it may be — an awareness of reality far beyond what this narrow box of space and time could hold . . . a justice which judges this world's justice, a beauty which fulfills this world's beauty, a stage great enough to make room for all the parts that all the people play in their own lives. If there is no such reality, then freedom and responsibility, those dimensions of manhood which are so precious to those young contemporaries, are nothing but illusions in the end. The witness they wish to bear to humanity and love and nature would in the end be futile. Activism would then unfailingly turn in upon itself and become simply the egocentric nihilism which is exactly what they detest in the world they have inherited. This seems to me the deepest crisis of all.

Now I will make my four proposals. They are, basically, proposals about the education of the clergy and their training for their ministry, and the first three all share a deep concern about prayer. Here again I am bound to think in terms of the clergy of the Episcopal Church, but not exclusively, and not in terms of the ministry of that church as it has been formed. I have no doubt that ministry in and through a settled congregation will remain a principal — perhaps even central — form of ministry. But in God's providence, the churches are now recovering a lost breadth and variety of ministries, such as they have not had since pre-Reformation days, and this must always be in our reckoning, I'm sure.

My first proposal is that the Bible must be again a familiar, used, major

element in the spirituality of the church. **Familiar** in terms both of knowing its principal content and of using its great themes and movements so that they provide in fact the architecture of our thoughts. **Used** in the sense of daily study. **Major** in that our reflection on the events and persons and on the teaching of Holy Scripture becomes a governing element in our decisions.

If this is to happen, I'm sure the clergy must be trained and formed differently than many are now. My point is not to do less than we are now doing. The church can have no quarrel with the current level of biblical teaching. But if the clergy are to be able to restore the Bible to the central place I hope for it, in their own lives and those of the congregation, the Bible must become far more a part of their own prayers and teaching than I think it now is.

It may well be that the great Prayer Book experiment of two daily offices in the common tongue failed of one of its purposes — that of including the laity in the daily worshipping community. But it did not fail in the life of the clergy, and it need not fail, if the clergy are willing to accept and practice the discipline of it. And the two choir offices — in whatever future form they may take — may well provide the steady, prayerful steeping in the Bible which is the core of the matter.

I add to that the discipline historically known as Mental Prayer or meditation. I have the feeling that the young men of this generation may be far more open to this than in my generation, when we were so bound by activism and the dutiful that we almost did not care to day-dream. It may be that young men of quieter spirit, who have largely turned against the more prescribed and dutiful society of past generations, will find in the disciplined day-dreaming which mental prayer is, a way to recover a lost birthright — really a way to learn how to pray the Bible. But they will not do this, I'm sure, unless they are encouraged to do it by those who are their teachers and older brothers.

The point of all this, of course, is not to pretend that we shall be returning to ancient purity and simplicity by affecting a Biblical style or Biblical words. The point is that the foundation of any true Christian spirituality is in the happened-ness, the fact, the history, of Israel and the Gospel and the Lord. In easy times, when the institutions of the church, its worship, its traditions, are credible, society can get along for a while on such snatches of the Bible as are embroidered on the fabric of its liturgies. But this is not our situation. There is little that is generally credible of what the church is and does. It may be that only Christ has genuine credibility. Certainly it is that the sturdy hope and determination that Christians must have in our time, if they are to get their work done, can only be found in the record of what God has done and has promised He will do. This is what is at stake — not merely a Biblical style.

My second proposal is that we all, clergy and laity, learn all over again how to pray. I don't say "to pray" because I suspect that there is a lot more praying going on, in these days, than anybody could imagine. But I also suspect that most of it is of a fairly undeveloped and often fruitless kind. It looks like worry, or a general enthusiasm for snow, or a general misery about American society, or a proud simplicity in dress, when in fact it is an act of prayer — a way of man becoming what he is, a statement he is making in the face of

reality. If it is of a low order, the fault is not in what is being prayed; it is the lack of experience and familiarity with the "how" of prayer; and there is no substitute in this for training and practice.

Here I must say once again that Episcopalians may have a particular problem, precisely because of the excellence of our Episcopal tradition. The glorious generalities of the Prayer Book were superb, of their kind. But by themselves they do no more than supply raw material for a man's own praying; and he must know how to use that material, and other material, to frame and compose his own statement, for his own situation.

Far more deeply, the learning how to pray is conditional on the assurance that the discipline and pain of prayer is real and is wonthwhile. There is no way to side-step this leap of faith. All that others can give here is brotherly assurance that the leap is worthwhile. It cannot be taught. Only the community which believes and acts on its belief can communicate this.

But there is much to be gained, in this process, by the faithfulness of the community to its own self-disciplines, chiefly to its disciplines of time, in prayer. Dr. Macquarrie has spoken of theology as the work of a community, within which individuals can develop their own way of saying what they must say, about the Tradition which the community holds. I would feel that this is probably true of prayer, in like manner. It may be that one of the functions of the seminary is to be a school of prayer.

The third proposal has to do with the way in which theology is taught. Again it was Dr. Macquarrie who reminded us that theology has a unique subject matter; theology is the word about the Word; and therefore the study of theology issues in an encounter with divine personal reality, and therefore issues in prayer. I don't know that I would want to say that this could not be true of other disciplines, nor did John Macquarrie say so. But positively, it would seem that at least the teaching of theology must be clearly such an encounter. Cardinal Suenens spoke of this at the Institute last Spring :*

"Our confidence is in the God of life and not in our powers of thought. Of course we need people thinking about the contexts of our faith and presenting it in new ways, but I think, in my generation at least, we were too much preoccupied with knowing things with certitude . . . We don't know as much about God to-day as we knew twenty-five years ago.

"Revelation is not a set of propositions . . . faith is God meeting me, and my meeting with God." And then he quoted Evagrius: "If you really pray, you are a theologian; and if you are a theologian, you really pray." To pray one's theology as one prays Holy Scripture is the need I see.

But the need is in the end a greater one than that; and I think this moves to my fourth proposal.

That has to do with the fullness and the future-orientation of the doctrine of God, as it is presented. The clerical God of popular American religious culture

* *The Future of the Christian Church,* Ramsey and Suenens, pp. 90-91.

of course never existed. But he was believed to exist; and when it became clear that he was not concerned, as a clergyman, with much that went on in history, he rightly dwindled to unimportance in the eyes of most of our contemporaries. The cult of the clergyman-God also bred an understanding of the church as a kind of memorial society, an ecclesiastical D.A.R. To quote Suenens again, "The Church cannot afford to canonize the past . . . There is no golden age that ought to be restored." And he quoted a phrase I did not recognise: "The Church lives by its memories; the world lives by its hope", and said that "it is absolutely essential that the Gospel be presented to the world as a hope".

I think — I hope — he does not mean that the "theology of hope" is the only theological vessel which will hold water to-day. What I understood him to mean — what I must say for myself, at any rate — is that the church must grasp, and then affirm, that the creation is not completed but is a continuing action; that the work of Christ must yet be done in every soul, in every generation; that the Cross is not completed nor the Offering completed until the whole of the created universe has been restored, in Christ, to him from whom it takes its origin.

This is not merely a future orientation, although it is that. It is also an immense widening of the horizon of Christian understanding. The Word of God whom we love and follow in his incarnate person is the same Word spoken at the source and beginning of all existence. His incarnate presence was only the supreme manifestation, as far as human eyes can see, of that presence which gives creation its continuing meaning, and of that further presence through his body, the church. We walk very slowly and gently here, for we do not see any of this clearly. Yet what we see opens to us a vision of a creating, redeeming and sanctifying purpose which includes the whole creation, and all time, and moves toward the final completion of the loving action in which the whole creation is born. There is no part of the created universe which is not to be re-created, redeemed, fulfilled; and in this work, it is given to man to share as fully as faith and grace make possible in the continuing re-creating, redeeming, fulfilling work of God in Christ.

In Christ, the incarnate Lord, what was begun in Adam is completed; and all things are brought into subjection to him from whom they come. In Christ, the Lord of the Church, the numberless Adams of history are called to their completion, and the whole of the created universe called to its proper fulfilment in the response of the created to the creating love of the Father.

Thus it is not only to the future that Christian doctrine looks, in hope. It looks equally around, down, up, to see the glory that lies ahead for man and nature alike. Therefore, there is no knowledge which is not of the Holy One, and no part of the creation which does not share Christ's mission in the church. Therefore, there is a greatness in the Christian calling which seems utterly unexpected in a society which has thought, in Temple's phrase, that God was "mainly interested in religion". What this unsuspected greatness can mean to a generation turned-off by the apparent pettiness of self-enclosed Christian piety remains to be seen.